

# Appointing Assessor Can't Insure Honesty, Integrity

By PHILIP E. WATSON  
County Assessor

In the wake of the current assessment scandal, the proposal has already been made to change the office of assessor from an elective one to an appointed position.

Those who support this proposal apparently believe that by definition, an appointed official is more honest than an elected one.

There seems little basis in fact for this belief. Tenure by appointment, rather than election, does not insure honesty.

Possibly the most corrupt property tax system that the United States has known was the product of the appointive system controlled by Huey Long in his Louisiana heyday.

THE KINGFISH learned well the lesson that "the power to tax is the power to destroy." Taxes came to be levied—not against the value of one's property—but the value of one's support to the Long regime. The taxpayers of the state were helpless because the tax officials were unreachable in their appointed offices.

While the Louisiana tax scandals under Long are perhaps the most dramatic example of corruption in appointed places, the history of government in all countries and in all times is filled with similar examples. The same, unfortunately, can be said for elected officials. So the argument of elected vs. appointed assessors cannot be won on these grounds.

It is also argued by those who favor appointing rather than electing assessors that this would remove them from the political arena and the pressures that go with campaign contributions. However, at one or more removes from every appointed official is an elected official—and any pressures that may be exerted on an elected official can in turn be exerted, second-

third hand, on any of his appointees.

IT IS A SERIOUS question, in fact, whether an appointed official may not be in a weaker position to resist political pressure than is an elected one since he is directly responsible for his job to one man or one group of men, where an elected official is responsible to the entire electorate.

I raised this question with

the Australian valuers (assessors) at the recent Claremont Conference. The Australians are appointed and are responsible to the Member of Parliament representing their districts. As our free-wheeling discussions ranged over the entire span of technical and policy decisions we had to make as assessors, the Australians eventually had to acknowledge that the restrictions imposed on them by virtue of their appointed posi-

tions sometimes ran counter to best assessment practice.

The argument actually centers on the nature of the responsibility of the assessor and whether that responsibility can be better served by an elected or an appointed official.

THE ASSESSOR is charged with placing a value on each piece of taxable property in uniform proportion, so that the tax burden is spread proportionately among all the property owners. As an elect-

ed official, in California, the assessor is not involved in the budget-making and tax-setting process—these are the responsibility of other groups of elected officials, the county supervisors, city councils, or school boards. The assessor cannot be ordered by anyone to raise or lower values to improve one's "political climate."

This separation of assessments—the value element in your tax bill—from the amount of tax money to be raised is a basic protection to

the taxpayer who has to foot the tax bill.

Changing the office of assessor from an elective to an appointed one would destroy this protection, and would create new problems by placing the assessor in a position where, as the creature of a budget body, he would be subjected to continuing pressure for value increases so that his elected superiors could "hold the line on the tax rate." As an appointed official, he cannot appeal for public support—he survives in his job at the pleasure of

those who have appointed him.

IT IS TRUE that elected officials can be subjected to more direct outside political pressures than appointed ones. The public, however, through the press, radio, and television, is in a better position to be informed about these pressures and his response to them than it would be to try to uncover any indirect pressures brought to bear on an appointed official. And where an appointed official is out of reach of the

public, an elected official must expose himself at regular intervals to the will of the people.

As an advocate of the democratic process, I believe the opportunity to vote an assessor out of office is a better safeguard for the public than to have the assessor in a spot where the public cannot touch him at all.

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